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ABSTRACT

The first stage of self-concept development concerns the parents' treatment of the child. Parents are advised to be accepting and supportive of children, particularly toddlers. Punishment and repression of toddlers' curiosity has deleterious effects on their emotional development. The second critical variable in establishing a sense of self concerns the child's perceptions of society's evaluation of his family. Teachers are advised to reflect positive values and attitudes towards children's parents, even if they hold different personal standards. Teachers must be aware of the emotional significance of initial parent-child separations. The third stage in the development of self-concept is the child's accumulation of positive and negative experiences. Conditions in which interpersonal and academic success are facilitated must be established. (DP)

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WHO AM I?

The Development of Self-Concept

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The development and nurture of a positive self-image is the single most important ingredient for significant learning to take place. When we have a positive self-concept, when we think well of ourselves, when we believe that we can succeed and achieve, when we perceive others feeling this way about us, most of us will respond affirmatively with growth and an increasing maturity.

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WHO AM I?

The Development of Self-Concept

DOROTHY J. KIESTER

Illustrated by Janice Schopler

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Preface

Who Am I? is offered in this simple form to all those whose roles in life bring them into close association with children, or with parents. There is much we do not know about human behavior; as people who care about children and the kind of world in which they have to live, we may find that our safest course is to base our efforts on what we do know: that everyone "does" best when he feels good about himself.

If we can help our children develop sturdy self-concepts with a healthy faith in themselves, maybe they will manage their own and society's future better than we could hope for in any other way. Maybe **Who Am I?** can be some help as we try to meet the vast human need for sensitivity and understanding—and caring.

The material in this booklet was first put together for the North Carolina Human Relations Commission as an aid to its work with people in the arena of social change. I am indebted to the commission staff members for their encouragement to make the material more widely available. As one of them said, "If we ever work ourselves out of a job it will be because everyone has reached the goal of a healthy self-concept."

Janice Schopler's drawings often say what words cannot, or they say it more clearly. I found it thoroughly satisfying to work with her, an artist whose talent is sharpened by being the mother of a toddler and two pre-teens, as well as by teaching in the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

I also acknowledge a large debt to Anne Dellinger, a research assistant at the Institute of

Government, who did the first editorial refinement and put the drawings and my words together in the first tentative layout.

Another major contribution was made by Dr. Mary Elizabeth Keister, Coordinator of Programs in Childhood Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her suggestions greatly enriched the content and helped me balance attention to successive stages of the child's development. In appreciation of her tremendous contribution to the field of child development and her profound understanding of the importance of the self-concept, this book is dedicated to her.

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Assistant Director
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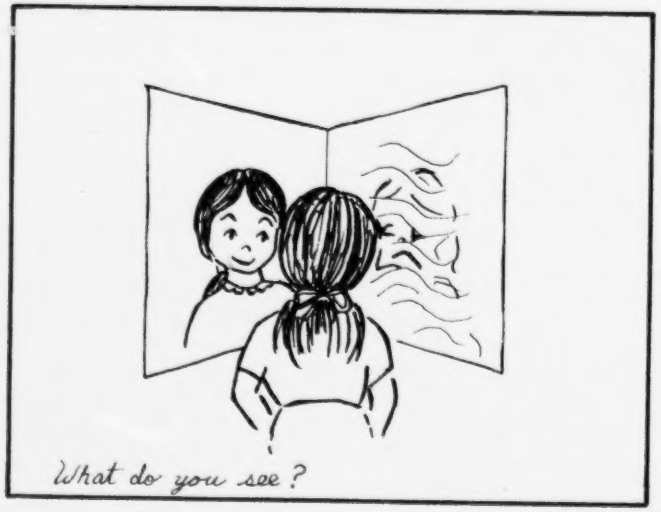
Chapel Hill, N.C.
April 1973

WHO AM I?

EVERYONE HAS SOME SENSE OF SELF. It is not just a part of his psychological equipment; it is the foundation on which personality is built and the primary determinant of behavior. The image may be a clear, strong, pleasing picture, or it may be a rather fuzzy one that, like poor television reception, wavers and blurs depending on the interference. Obviously, we would all prefer the strong, clear, good self-image, and we would wish the same for others, because then we could expect their behavior to be both predictable and pleasant.

An interesting fact about human behavior is that whether the self-concept is good or bad, if the treatment a person receives is consistent with his self-concept, that concept is fortified. If a person thinks of himself as pleasant and likable or even lovable, and individuals important to him or people in general treat him warmly, then he is even more sure that he is pleasant and likable. The opposite is equally true; if he feels that he is not very likable, and people avoid him or treat him harshly, his negative self-concept is confirmed.



If the treatment he receives does not agree with his self-image, some internal conflict is created. When a person who feels that he is good and worthwhile is not treated that way, he is likely to make an effort to change the other person's treatment of him, and the form this effort takes will depend on his over-all perception of the world. If previous experience has led him to believe that the world is fairly hostile, then he may have to fight to protect himself and to correct others' treatment of him. If he feels that the world is basically friendly, then his effort to bring about change in others' treatment of him will more likely be gentle and persuasive.

Similarly, when a person who has thought of himself as being unlovable gets warm, accepting treatment, he too will probably experience confusion and some degree of internal conflict. In a sense, his psyche is receiving conflicting messages—one from himself saying he is no good, and one from someone else important to him saying he **is** good. Since his own perception is closer to him and therefore stronger, he is likely to try to resolve the conflict by attempting to prove to the other person that he is as he has always thought—no good. If the acceptance and understanding persist and the other person continues to treat him as if he were likable and worthwhile, the internal conflict may begin to resolve itself through some modification of the

self-concept—"Maybe I'm not so bad after all." Any significant change in perception of self will inevitably be reflected in behavior.

If the person with a weak self-concept receives treatment that differs from what he thought he deserved, he may experience very little internal struggle as his perception of himself begins to change. Obviously this change can be for better or for worse. Making his self-concept conform to bad treatment is a self-destructive adjustment, but if the treatment is good and his self-concept is modified for the better, that change represents growth.

Whether either adjustment in self-concept, upward or downward, is lasting will probably depend on how important the other people are to him and

how many people seem to be involved in this kind of reaction to him as a person.

Whether an individual fights to retain a good self-image or to prove a bad one will depend largely on how deeply imprinted the self-image that he holds is. The more experience he has had with life—and this may or may not be simply a product of chronological age—the more vigorously he is likely to fight to protect the image with which he is comfortable. Comfort, of course, is a relative thing, but in this case psychic comfort derives from having a well-known set of behaviors that are used almost automatically in response to external stimuli and therefore have at least the comfort of being familiar. Unfortunately, most people find it much more difficult to modify a self-concept upward and hold firmly to "good" expectations of self than to let a self-image slip destructively and indulge "bad" expectations of self.

These statements are obviously value-laden, implying that one kind of behavior is "better" than another; and that position requires some justification. In this discussion the terms "good" and "bad" are meant not as moral judgments but as indexes of how well the person gets along in the world, how successful he can be in achieving what he wants for himself, and whether his behavior proves destructive or constructive with respect to the rights and feelings of others.

Origin of Self-Concept

It is easier to understand how an adult has become what he is when we review the formation of the self-concept in infancy and childhood. Although it may seem contradictory to say that a child sees himself as a phenomenon that precedes self-awareness, in one sense it is true. The infant who has known only loving treatment, prompt fulfillment of his physiological needs, and an emotional atmosphere of pervasive warmth is quite a different little person from the one who has been handled roughly, with no communication of love, or allowed to go hungry and cold and wet without apparent recognition of or concern for his feelings. At an extremely early age the child's behavior will almost inevitably reflect the kind of treatment he has had. In a way his behavior reflects a beginning self-concept.

On the strength of this beginning, there is an early development of behavior. The baby can become manipulative—in fact, probably will—and the result can be either pleasing or controlling, or both.

If he learns that crying lustily will produce the attention he wants, then his method for getting attention will be to cry. If he learns that cooing and

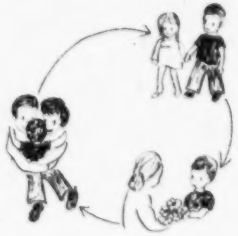
...the little tyrant

and gurgling quickly produce a favorable response, these will be included among his techniques, and crying will be reserved for painful or more critical situations. If the parents' response to his crying is perfunctory, but does include at least some attention and perhaps correction of unpleasant circumstances, the baby may grow more and more aggressive in his controlling behavior with less and less effort to please. These responses may occur at a completely instinctive level, but they nonetheless establish patterns of behavior. If aggressive behavior brings some form of punishment, he may learn not to cry, but since he has not had favorable response to his efforts to please or has not learned how to use pleasing behavior as a manipulative device, he may become simply passive and accepting. In this case the psychological nutrition may be so deficient that the child's physical as well as emotional development is severely retarded.

All of this infantile behavior is an effort to find security. Very little imagination is required to see how the same devices for gaining attention, approval, and the satisfaction of security needs can be pursued by the child as he grows up and carried on into adulthood.

It is curious and sometimes discouraging to realize that the parents who do so much to establish these early patterns of behavior are more often than not treating the child as an extension of themselves, and therefore as deserving or undeserving of loving care. If the parent has a very low sense of his own worth, then that which above all other things is his may also seem to be of little worth. On the other hand, if he **does** feel loved (particularly if the young mother feels the love and support of her husband, the child's father), the baby will be told and shown in hundreds of ways that he was wanted and is deeply loved.

Parents set in motion a circular interaction between the child and other people, and the parents reap the first harvest. If they treat the child lovingly, he is loving in response. This makes him appealing and lovable, so that he provokes more feelings and manifestations of love, and the benign circle of action, response, reaction and two-way expectation is well established.



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Thrills and Chills of Toddlerhood

For most people the gurgling, cooing baby evokes feelings of protectiveness and warm desires to cuddle him—to make him smile, laugh out loud, and snuggle up to the attentive adult. When the little one begins to want his own way, to try to pull up on the furniture, to taste everything, to climb—in short, to test his own powers—he becomes a different kind of charge. The adult who cares for him may find the temptation to say "No, no" outweighing all other impulses. As the toddler gains confidence and explores more and more daringly, he also grows more assertive in what he wants to do, and how and when. He pits his will against that of his mother or father or other caretaker, and unless the adult is very relaxed and understanding of this stage of development, the toddler's defiance can be exasperating in the extreme.

Instead of the delightful little bundle of compliance the infant was, the toddler suddenly may seem to have become a little monster bent on destroying himself and all his mother's prize bric-a-brac. Only when he is asleep is he precious and defenseless and unthreatening. This is a difficult time for parents who have great need for the child "to behave," always to be a model of obedience and storybook charm. The toddler is testing his strength in many ways and learning how to make his muscles respond to his will. He is learning by trial and error. The fact

that there may be many errors, many little hurts and bruises, many messes to clean up (some of them created deliberately just to find out what happens when a cup is thrown on the floor or milk is poured into the sock drawer) can be a severe test of the parents' willingness to let the baby grow up. It tests their tolerance for having the baby become an individual in his own right, separate from them. It tests the caregiver's capacity to understand and accept the toddler's need to experiment and learn by doing and to begin reaching toward independence.

If the parents find this experimentation a threat to their authority, they are deeply troubled by the child's refusal of help, his refusal to do what they want him to do. If they find the threat more than they can tolerate, they may become quite restrictive

and even harshly punishing. They perceive this reaching-out for growth as the first sign that the child is "getting out of control," and they seek to reaffirm their authority at any cost. Their own self-images may require that they retain complete control.

Such a need on the part of whoever cares for the child during most of his waking hours can result in the child's suffering a terrible conflict between what nature and instinct dictate as a part of his physical, mental, and social development and the punitive repression that "his adults" impose. If he is a healthy little fellow, he will struggle hard in this conflict and may go through a period of being "a perfect little demon." Obviously, the more the parents oppose his efforts to grow, the more defiant his behavior will seem.

On the other hand, parents who can accept the toddler's experimental stage—when he is trying to discover his limits and powers, the way things work, the smell and taste and feel and durability of objects—will understand that it is normal and healthy. They will congratulate him for his achievements, console him for the bumps, clean up the messes without retaliation, and glory in their child's progress. As they do this, they communicate to him that they have confidence in him and want him to grow, that it is all right to make honest mistakes. And the child's trust in them will be confirmed and his faith in himself fortified.

When parents have to punish and repress "defiance," the consequences are grim. The message received by the toddler is that he dare not assert himself. The extreme response to this pattern, when there is no leavening of love and relaxation of parental authoritarianism, is a passive personality with no self-confidence, no will to try new things, and no expectation of achievement. The unmotivated adult is born. To counter later the influence of this repression during the toddling years is difficult if not impossible. The value of having parents (and all who care for young children) understand the importance of this stage of growth can hardly be overemphasized.

When parents place a child in day care, the opportunity to modify a destructive pattern is there if the caregivers in the day-care program have the warm understanding that the situation requires. If they do, they not only will encourage the toddler in his natural efforts to grow but will also be supportive and understanding with the parents in helping them to understand and tolerate this normal behavior. It is very helpful to young, unsure parents to be assured

to young, unsure parents . . .

that two- and three-year-old experimenting and negativism are normal and do not reflect badly on their performance as parents. When the extended family was still with us, it was the grandmother's traditional role to give this assurance. Now, when grandmothers are not so ever-present (nor so all-wise as tradition would have them), the people in day care can do much to influence for better or for worse the feelings of security that young parents need. To help them relax and enjoy their children is a blessing that strengthens their self-concept in this vital role. To be critical and condemnatory is a wrong that can have devastating effects on both parents and children.

"And Now We Are Six"

For most emotionally healthy children, the ages of four and five are much less tempestuous than the toddler years. For one thing, the experiments are usually more successful and therefore less trying for the adults around them. For another, the children are more secure in their self-hood and no longer need to establish self-ness by doing exactly the opposite of what mommy and daddy want. This is usually a more or less tranquil period in which the child enjoys pleasing the parents and the parents get great pleasure from having their child show off his accomplishments.

When this period goes well, a happy pattern of trust and good behavior is fairly well established, and entering the first grade at age six is a great adventure. Unfortunately, if things have not gone well, the challenge to the first-grade teacher can be severe and enormously important. Unquestionably, teachers along with parents and day-care workers can also have a great deal to do with the early development of the child's self-concept. However, unless the teacher is both sensitive and well trained, her tendency is to respond to the child's acted-out expectations of her. If the child has learned to expect understanding and loving treatment from adults, he is likely to be appealing, trusting, and lovable with the teacher, who accordingly responds to him in such a way as to affirm his positive, though largely unconscious, self-concept. Unfortunately, a child who has learned that adults are apt to be harsh, unpredictable, preoccupied with their own problems, and therefore

inattentive to his needs will follow the pattern of behavior that he has learned at home. He will either demand attention, usually aggressively and often by misbehavior, or he will avoid the teacher whenever possible and indicate complete distrust. Only an extremely sensitive teacher understands that the child's expectations are a projection of his self-concept—of how he has learned to feel about himself —and only a teacher who also has considerable self-control can treat a child as he should be treated and not as he seems to be asking to be handled.

For the child who has in this way gotten off to a bad start, teachers or day-care staff members may have the first significant opportunity to help to modify an early negative self-concept. The excuse of too many children or not enough time is never used by a teacher who is truly sensitive to the importance of her relationship with the child and to the pattern of interaction that she has an obligation to influence.

Submerged Effects of Criticism

The first phase of development in a child's personality and self-concept results from how other people treat him, and therefore how he perceives he is valued by them and is entitled to value himself. The second stage incorporates his perception of how his parents are viewed by other people. Since his primary sense of identity is derived from his parents, he is an extension of them and perceives himself as a part of his family in his relationships with the larger world. If the family receives direct or implied approval from other figures of authority, such as teachers, neighbors, key figures in the church or Sunday School, he can be proud of them and proud of himself. If they are criticized or depreciated, even indirectly, the criticism can only be perceived by the child as pertaining equally to himself.

Sometimes the subtle message conveyed to the child escapes the adult who does not maintain a conscious vigil on the probable effect of his words or actions on the child. For example, a teacher may feel that it is her responsibility to correct the child's language, but if he is using what he was taught at home, the thoughtless correction may, in effect, say to him, "Your parents are ignorant or bad and they have taught you bad things."

It is frequently a temptation to laugh at an unusual name; parents can saddle their children with

names that sound strange to those who do not know the reasons for the choice. For a child to have his name laughed at is to have himself laughed at, humiliated, and he incorporates his parents in his feeling of shame and resentment. He "hates" the person who laughs at him, but he may also "hate" his parents for giving him a name that other people find ridiculous.

It is also insensitive to make fun of a child's favorite foods if they do not conform to the ethnic preferences of the day-care workers or teachers or Sunday School picnic organizers. To say, even gently, such things as, "We don't eat that," is to say that there is something wrong with the folks that do—a crushing put-down to a child whose mother has lovingly fixed his favorite food for him to take to the picnic.

Significance of Separation

Those who are responsible for a child's care in his first experience of separation from his parents, even the very brief separation of Sunday School or part-day day care, should be particularly sensitive to the psychological presence of the parents with the child. He needs to feel the support of their psychological presence, and if the caregivers (including baby-sitters) do anything to depreciate the mother and/or father, the child may lose the sense of unseen support and the physical separation becomes frightening. "Maybe Mother won't be there when I get home, or maybe she won't be the same."

Even when children are physically separated from their parents at a very early age, they are never completely separated psychologically. This means that child-care workers, adoptive parents, and all who have any responsibility for a child who has to be separated from his parents must do everything possible to help him to a positive interpretation of why the separation occurred, whether it is for an hour or permanent. Along with this, he needs a positive image of his parents as people in order to incorporate that positive image into his self-concept. The truly competent professional—day-care worker, teacher, social worker, or any other person with professional responsibility for children—knows that no one can " be better" for a child than his own parents, because no one else can **be** a child's own parents. The importance of the parent-child relationship is primary in his development; others will have their

intrinsic value enhanced as they fortify or build on the primary relationship.

As the child matures, so will his understanding of reality and the causes for problems, but the essential image of his parents should be positive from the outset.

Maintaining a positive image for the child is equally important when one parent is absent from the home, whether by desertion, divorce, death, imprisonment, or the many other reasons that may be beyond the parents' immediate control. One parent who feels unjustly treated by the other and finds that all bad behavior in the child is a reflection of badness in the other parent can create great conflict for the child that will inevitably have a deleterious effect on the child's perception of his own worth.

Whose Values?

A wide range of people outside the home have an opportunity to add to the child's sense of how his parents are perceived by others. We have spoken of day-care workers and teachers and people in the church; we should also include the police, doctors and nurses, social agency representatives, and even the child's peers. While it is unrealistic to expect that everyone associated with the child in any way will be sensitive to the importance of the parent/child relationship, certainly all who work with children—regardless of their professional setting— who have any training at all in personality development should periodically assess their own performance.

Whether the parents measure up to the professional's personal standards of acceptability is beside the point. Ethnic, cultural, social, economic, even moral differences are not of the child's making; neither are they intrinsically good or bad. But if the child is made to feel that to be different from an authority figure is to be bad (and this is the inevitable interpretation if the authority figure implies that the child's parents are less than acceptable), then he is in effect being made guilty of the sins of his parents. This not only is unfair to the child in every sense but also inevitably produces in him a resentment that has to be directed against his parents, against the critics (possibly including all of society that holds

the same view as the critic), or against himself. Resentment is a destructive emotion whichever direction it takes. Directed against society, it can easily result in delinquent or generally antisocial behavior. Directed against his parents, it results in a breakdown of family ties, a weakening or loss of parental authority, and a profound confusion for the child, who can blame his parents if he wants to but does not thereby escape from the consequences of their unacceptability—his view of himself. Directed against himself, resentment means that he feels some big and incomprehensible guilt from which he has no way of absolving himself. A great deal of such self-destructive behavior as drug abuse has its origin in this kind of confused mixture of resentment and guilt.

The fact that most, if not all, of this conflict is deeply buried in the child's subconscious or unconscious makes it no less real or less destructive. It is therefore of paramount importance that, particularly with small children, great care be taken to avoid thoughtless remarks—either to the child or in the child's hearing—that depreciate the parents. For example, a child-care worker may say to a child,

"Why can't your mother get you cleaned up before you come to the day-care center?" Or say to another worker in the child's hearing, "I don't know why that woman can't take care of her children on the weekends. They're always sick when they get back here on Monday." Or a teacher may say, "You can't expect much, coming out of that home." Or other comments even more judgmental and painful. Whether such remarks arise from frustration or from a genuine concern for the child, they always reveal a lack of understanding about what is essential to the child's well-being.

Before blaming the parents for the problems they create for the child, the person who blames should be very sure that his feelings are genuinely based on his concern for the child and not on his annoyance that a child with problems or special needs makes his, the professional's, job more difficult. In other words, is he more concerned for his own convenience and comfort than for the child's well-being? Even if his concern for the child is genuine, he must still be very cautious about blaming parents because of the extremely negative implications this can have for the child's self-image. Furthermore, assigning blame is futile, since criticism without understanding is much more destructive than helpful. When understanding accompanies criticism, the effort is toward finding a solution to the difficulty rather than simply condemning the parents for their inadequacy. It does no good and can do much harm to dwell on parents' irresponsibility without knowing its cause or what might help the parents to be more responsible. It is even more destructive to be critical of cultural differences without knowing what reality adaptations may underlie the practices and values of which the "professional" is critical. Given the importance of the parent/child relationship, efforts should always be toward strengthening the family through the child, if he is the point of contact, in full recognition that life styles can deviate from the majority pattern of the community without being destructive to a child's essential well-being.

Life Experiences

The first stage in the development of the self-concept is the parents' treatment of the child, and the second is the child's perception of society's

evaluation of his family, including himself; the third stage is the child's accumulation of experiences with success and failure. At any age, success in human relationships is just as important as experience with other kinds of achievement. For example, while it may be very ego-supportive for the child to make an all-A record in school, if he feels that the A's are more important to his parents than he is, the net result can be a distorted sense of the value of achievement and an actual depreciation of himself as a person. On the other hand, if the parents' pride in his A's stems from pride in the child and satisfaction in his accomplishment for his sake more than their own, he does not feel that he risks losing their love when he is less than perfect. This latter attitude puts achievement in a healthy perspective and strengthens the kind of relationship between child and parent in which the child knows that he is valued for his own sake and can always count on his parents' support no matter how things turn out. With this strong sense of support, the child can then risk failure.

Any new venture entails a certain risk. It is probably safe to generalize that for most people the expectation of success or failure governs the level of motivation and that expectation will be largely based on the individual's past experience. Very few are willing to launch into an activity in which they are reasonably sure of failure. On the other hand, if the outcome is really unknown, the knowledge that support can be counted on from people who are important even if failure does occur gives the child or adult courage to try the unknown. Therefore, two components go into motivation in this dimension. One is the expectation of support regardless of the outcome. The other results from previous experience. If the person has known more success than failure, his motivation to try the unknown will be higher. By the same token, if he has known more failure than success, he may find that his reluctance to try again leads others to label him "unmotivated," "lazy," "shiftless" or "no-count." Behind these labels,

one will probably find a person whose expectations are a product of his experience and whose level of motivation is low because experience has taught him not to expect much success.

Whether he be child or adult, a person's average daily behavior shows pretty well whether he has much capacity to care for others. It is often said that one can give love only when love has been received, and this carries over into ordinary casual relationships. For example, the capacity to care for others is the basis for respecting others, and a person cannot feel genuine respect for others if he has no respect for himself. He may feel fear or envy, he may be impressed with their accomplishments; but in terms of a simple, person-to-person respect for the feelings and rights of the other, his capacity for giving will be limited by how he feels about himself.

The ability to "succeed" with interpersonal relationships may be even more important than material success, and even for the latter, more significant than talent or tangible resources because of the emotional supports it generates. If a person is forced by circumstances into a new relationship—whether with a new acquaintance, a new boss, a new teacher, or even a new spouse—the amount of effort he puts into making the relationship work will be determined to a considerable extent by whether he expects it to be successful. If he does not, the first hint of difficulty is likely to be perceived as confirmation of his fears, and he gives up. Although this tendency to give up easily is likely to result in yet another label, "no stick-to-it-iveness," the label should not be allowed to obscure the essential fact of a damaged self-image, a low self-esteem. It is tragic that the very person who needs love and encouragement the most is the one least likely to be able to develop the relationships that will provide them.

The Adult Is the Child Grown Up

We therefore see in a variety of ways how the child is father of the man. It is fairly easy to see the sources of a child's behavior because he is

closer in time to the initial cause. When that same child grows up, the causes of his behavior, even though they have exactly the same roots, may not be so easily discernible. For one thing, adults tend to be more unpredictable. There will have been many intervening experiences between the initial cause and the present state, some of which will, on balance, have been good and others bad. We may say that someone is mature in his management of affairs and at other times is childish in his responses. By childish we ordinarily mean that the response, whatever the provocation, seems to be typical of a child, who is not expected to have mature judgment, or, for that matter, mature self-control. Nonetheless, the roots of self-discipline, sensitivity, and fairness (hallmarks of maturity) are in the person's self-concept, which began its development in very early childhood.

For all reasonably normal people, there is a normal range of fluctuation. Everyone has good days and bad days, some with wider swings between extremes than others, some with more good days than bad or vice versa. Very few maintain a completely even keel. A person's needs continue throughout his entire life, and in the normal course of living there will be times when his needs are more adequately met than at other times. When a person feels deprived in some sense or when his feelings of having approval and support—the fortifications of the self-concept—are at low ebb, the individual feels bad about himself and may act out the feeling in defensiveness, irritability, reduced sensitivity to the feelings of others, and in general, behavior that reflects a reaction to the damage his self-concept has suffered. If the adult's usual circumstances are good and stable—if his job is satisfying, if his home situation is harmonious, if he has reason in general to feel loved and appreciated—then his normal level of self-esteem can usually reassert itself fairly quickly. Exactly the same is true for a child when life is good and stable. He likes school, likes his teacher, has some good friends, gets on well with his parents, and minor injuries to his self-esteem are quickly forgotten. Even fatigue can be a factor in how well the person can absorb real or fancied indignities without losing his equilibrium. If, on the other hand, the normal supports are low and the basic level of self-concept is relatively low, even small slights are

... Everyone has good days and bad days

much more difficult to cope with. If the blows to self-esteem are fairly large and real and the self-concept is not very strong, then the defensive reactions can be hostile and destructive. Or the individual can withdraw in his hurt and distrust so that he is almost inaccessible for help even when others would like to help him.

Adult behavior is made more complex by virtue of the number and range of experiences that influence the stability of the self-concept. Paradoxically, the person with a strong sense of self is likely to have developed strong, dependable relationships that help him through difficult periods, but the person with a weak sense of self may not have been able to build support around him and for this reason his well-being is always in jeopardy. He needs more understanding and sensitive treatment from others, but in general does not behave in such a way as to elicit understanding and compassion.

To bring the argument full circle, the importance of early experiences in a child's life are very evident in their influence on the formation of his self-concept and on his future ability to deal with life. In the total scheme of things, however unfair it may seem, the stronger a person is, the better able he is to influence his own "luck" or destiny. The weaker he is, the less influence he will have on the course of his own life.

Since this is so, it behooves everyone who has any kind of association with children to make every effort to be as sensitive and as loving as possible with every child in order to help him get off to a good start in developing a strong self-concept. After all, his life depends upon it.

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